

ARTISTS LIBERATION



rough notes 1986.

ARTISTS LIBERATION:

rough notes 1986.

INTRODUCTION

1 GENERAL OPPRESSION OF HUMAN CREATIVITY

2 THE VITAL ROLE OF ARTISTS AND THE VALUE OF ART

3 ART & CLASS

The Invisible New Working Class Intelligentsia
The Illusion of Scarcity of Resources for Art
Exploited rather than Privileged
Identity and Politics
Where Are They Now?
The Power of Artists
How Can Artists Get What They Want?

4 THE QUESTION OF QUALITY

The End of 'Quality'
Beauty and the Beast
The Failure of Success

5 CLASS CONSCIOUS CULTURE

Is This Why Modern Art is Incomprehensible?
Fine Arts Claim to Superiority
Personal History Versus Art History
Marginalised Groups
A Class Conscious Art?
The Problem of Collective Working
Possible Characteristics of a Working Class Art
Terms: Working Class Defined

6 ARTISTS SUPPORT ARTIST

7 BRIEF VIEWPOINT OF AUTHOR

+ Bibliography Fragments
+ Postscript on Architects

Note: This is an early draft. The author would appreciate your comments.
Also, as it is self published in a small edition, perhaps you could pass
it on to someone else who might be interested.

INTRODUCTION

These notes, however inaccurate they are at present, convey at heart the current mood amongst many of Britain's artists. Never have the conditions been more conducive to an awakening of selfconfidence and assertiveness amongst our great community of artists. We are amongst the most important resources of our peoples. The art we see now is the tip of an iceberg; an enormous store of human creativity is awaiting its chance to be shown, to grow, to evolve, to emanate through the whole of our culture.

All around the country there are signs of this profound historical shift taking root in the activities of groups of artists. There are countless collectives formed around the obtaining and running of studios, resources and showing spaces. Many artists have been remaking the contexts in which their work is distributed and shown, either by organising shows or complete spaces. The International Mail Art Network has successfully linked thousands of artists worldwide in an escalating egalitarian communications system, the like of which has never been seen on earth before. Artists have been reclaiming connections with communities excluded from elitist art forms. Women and black artists particularly have made breakthroughs in collective working and content. A dynamic 'National Artists Association' has arisen with countrywide support. Many people in the art grant and education establishment are now potential allies who can be reached with personal contacts. There are artists support groups exploring the roots of irrational attitudes towards and amongst artists. People are generally talking about art and money and racism and democracy in a more aggressive and clear-headed way.

All this mass of activity is surging in the same human direction and, if you haven't noticed, it is only the blockade imposed by the reactionary Art Press that obscures the great progress being made. The separate strands need only a THEORY to bind them into an irresistible whole - a unity that will shake the old world to bits. We can develop such a theory in the next decade through a massive debate amongst artists. This script is simply one contribution towards this debate.

1 OPPRESSION OF HUMAN CREATIVITY

The oppression of artists exists within a ubiquitous oppression of creativity throughout the population. Of course, this is most poignantly directed at young children. Instead of a joyful response to original and creative approaches to their environment, young people from the cradle onwards are disciplined to 'behave' rigidly within often perverse social norms (behaviour outside this norm is 'naughty' and makes everyone feel uncomfortable . . . to the point of appearing to be a threat to our security and 'civilised order'). Of course, it is reasonable that parents want their children to act acceptably in society, but it is my observation that children do decide to conform to a sociable degree without 'discipline'. Apart from a profound insult to a child's intelligence (often a terminal blow), this process of 'training', from potty onwards, values the conforming to rigid behavioural rules above the discovery of new solutions to each moment of time and space, and is a profoundly hurtful process.

This leads to a situation in which creativity (the natural flexible functioning of the brain) is stifled or severely restricted and gives rise to the various stereotypes under which artists, at least those who have retained the integrity to work from their own hearts, labour. These stereotypes typify artists as different, gifted, spoiled by success, wierd, mad, irresponsible dropouts, inspired by hardship, a rarefied activity, esotericists, social scroungers, heroes and rebels.

Because of this general oppression of creativity, there is not much attention or interest in the art process outside the artist community. Because we escaped some of the repression of creativity, we get labelled privileged. This is why it is particularly important that we learn to support each other. We cannot expect support from non-artists who have probably suffered the most horrific suppression of their own creative responses and projects at a very early age. The negativity they may throw at us is certainly a reflection of the suffering they have endured in this area.

Unfortunately, artists also believe the stereotypes levelled at them and this is what makes artist unity and support difficult. This is sometimes called internalising oppression.

2 THE VITAL ROLE OF ARTISTS

"People and culture are inseparable. For culture is the aggregate of concepts and values which characterise a community. It then follows that a people without culture are in themselves not in full existence."

*General Olusegun Obasanjo, 1976
quoted by Eddie Chambers in CIRCA 7*

It is particularly important that artists are coherent about the value of art. A main facet of their oppression is in being led to believe that their activity has no value compared with 'real' work. The value of artwork is hard to measure in financial terms. The complex values that artists work with do not relate to the linear sales-orientated value of a money system. Within the confusion this causes, it is easy for artists to think they are not in a position to claim a decent living wage for what they produce. This works as a double bind because work that is not paid in society has a low status (for example, parenting). Through this process the artist internalises a feeling that their work is a luxury or trivial and, because they cannot sell their work, unwanted and perhaps socially irrelevant.

Artwork meets a human need for created beauty and the organisation of forms to express meanings. Art can also be relaxing, providing space for reflection in contrast to the stress of much labour. In fact, art contradicts much of the meaningless, coercive and banal aspects of production (although for many people things are presented as the opposite - all productive activity as sane and all modern art as without sense or use!).

It can also give dignity to people's struggle and suffering. It can provide a visual form to complex invisible instruments of oppression which can focus our anger and motivate us to action (although it must be admitted that much such art petrifies or horrifies us into inaction or apathy).

"Artists Liberation is an important issue for everyone because what is at stake is the valuing of what is most focused and affirmative in the human spirit through the vehicle of artistic achievement."

"The artist is with every word, image, sound or gesture reclaiming and redefining human intelligence."

"The extent to which artists are devalued economically and in other ways is a reflection of a massive internalised feeling of worthlessness in the society as a whole."

*All from a letter
Sally Potter, October 1985*

However, we are now at a point of flux in history. Uncertainty and doubt pervade the mood of the day.

"We are living the extinction of official socialism. When the opposition loses its politics it must root in art."

Howard Baker (Playwright)
The Guardian, 10-2-86

Although people are directed to see artists as parasites and devalue art, they also hold out a hope in their hearts that artists will win through and take the lead to achieve a system of more human and life enhancing values.

THE VALUE OF ART

It is my personal judgement that human relations are essentially artistic at their deepest level of connectedness. I noticed this most clearly in my relation with my young son. There is first the level of provision (dependence survival). Below this is a level of physical caring and love which is generally known as affection. But deeper than this, or perhaps not deeper but more articulated and coherent, is a communications relationship - improvised inter-responses flowing between us so our thought processes mingle toward unity in play or in conflict. Accompanied by intimacy, trust and commitment, it is this communication, or whatever, that reaches a full human relationship (by which we can experience the fullness of another person's presence).

With adults things are complicated, but the intuitive interaction which gives mutual delight and expansion is a more important connection than that achieved in sex and mutual dependency, etc. So what I'm trying to say is that I observe that the deeper and most distinctively human aspects of human relations are aesthetic in nature. The human to human relation has an emotional claim to first priority but human to world/nature/object can also be seen as existing on similar levels. I would say art is a broad exploration of all these nuances of human relation.

In a society pervaded by business relations and relationships of measurement (science and technology) the position and manner in which art exists in our culture reflects the social status we give to these most basic of human beingnesses. If balance is to exist in our society, then the position of art is central.

Not only is art about human relations but art can actually exist in the medium of human relating as an intervention in human affairs and the channels of human affairs.

We can say that the art we would like to see is about the quality of human relationships to other humans and the world.

3 ART & CLASS

THE INVISIBLE NEW WORKING CLASS INTELLIGENTSIA

The expansion of higher education into the post-war years in Britain was followed by the entry of many thousands of upwardly (and not so upwardly) mobile working class youth from the poorer state grammar schools into the new Polytechnics and Art Schools. For the first time ever a large but *invisible* working class intelligentsia has been created.

It is invisible and almost unconscious because in British terms a working class intelligentsia is *impossible* because by definition the working classes are 'not intelligent'. People processed by higher education are supposed, magically, to become 'middle class'. Of course the curriculum and expected mannerisms, style, language, accent and so on is all firmly derived from middle class academic tradition. But it is absurd to expect a few years of education with a distorted world view to change one's CLASS even with a bit of preparation from ambitious parents keen to 'get' on and 'better themselves'. Class identity goes a lot deeper than the learning of facts or manners. Taking your elbows off the table and learning to say things rather than finky don't, sorry doesn't, make you middle class any more than being on a monthly wage or owning your own house does later in life.

In the fabulous '60s the first wave of artists from the lower echelons of society started to make trouble and demand in a loud and naive way a social relevance to Art practice. This huge struggle resulted in a whole new category being created to contain and defuse them. Community Art was formed to protect Fine Art from the riff raff. Community artists, for all their achievements, have been relegated to the fourth division in the League of Meaning and Status.

For the first time in history a large section of the population is trying to realise their vocation in Art. Along with the college grant aid scheme and the following unemployment benefit the result is a huge number of artists who have no place in society but continue to work without pay and sometimes with no exposure.

In addition to this huge number of new working class artists, armed with their class consciousness (even if temporarily occluded), many other artists have a private income. These artists have the same economic interests as the working class even if they are a bit culturally hoorah. Basically they are exploited as producers of value even if their wine and cheese grins cover their economic deprivation.

THE ILLUSION OF SCARCITY OF RESOURCES FOR ART

The demands of the commercial art market supported by the owning-class art collectors is small, academic, exclusive and limited. Most people don't buy artist's work because they have internalised the oppressive image of themselves as being without 'taste'. Art is thought of as an inane business full of incomprehensible gesture and empty subtleties.

Contemporary art made for the market fulfills this 'superior' role with flair and panache.

So with a mass of artists and a limited market there is inevitably a scarcity of resources for art. There is *no real shortage* of global resources to support art activity — the apparent shortage is due to the same irrational system of exchange value that has food mountains in Europe whilst people starve in North Africa. This imposed scarcity means that however hard we strive there is only room for a small number of people up there as 'great' or even with a decent living wage. You can only be successful at the expense of some other artists being downrated or dead.

I have recently experienced meetings in which one group of artists tries to negotiate a bigger slice of the diminishing art cake by identifying a weaker group to be chopped. As a prelude the weaker group is derided and their work made to seem worthless. Classic. Dog eat dog. And we fall for it!

The day-to-day expression of the competition to survive and gain social recognition of the value of our work is that artists' critical faculties are invaded. The tools of the trade, critical judgement, are turned against each other. Rather than developing a critique by which to judge our art by our own standards we measure ourselves against each others' 'Success'. What sort of art is it that serves the survival of the artist best? Of course it is the art which is most servile.

This ethos is encouraged and ritualised by the endless banal competitions which often have the cheek to charge the artist a large handling fee for the privilege of being ignored. Or they may be free but offer a pittance in prize value whilst spending hundreds of times this on advertising, promotion and management.

The reality beneath all this competitive madness is that our roles as artists are *not in conflict* with each other. There are plenty of resources for everyone to realise their artistic projects. Most people welcome art in their lives if it arrives organically rather than being foisted on them from above like medicine. If the mental fog of confusion which hides the new

working class intelligentsia were blown away there would be no surplus of artists and every artist would be very much in demand. It will just take quite a few of us to blow at once.

EXPLOITED RATHER THAN PRIVILEGED

Whatever radical artists do, however extreme they get in their desperation, it always appears on retrospect that they were serving the interests of corporate capitalism (e.g. Dada and Surrealism). In the world of Art nothing changes whilst everything must be 'original'. The reason for the stasis is as plain and difficult to see as the nose on our face.

The terms of reference, identity and social status, in other words the whole cultural context, is always conservative. The individual artist, whatever her personal background — however much she rants and raves — is set up to serve.

The invention of new images is very important to the continual innovation of appearances that is demanded by the market in terms of packaging, advertising and actual forms of commodities. If these ideas can be thrown up by an unpaid workforce of avant garde artists all the better! It is easy to ignore truly radical and dangerous work as so few people have seen it . . . anyway most radical art — outside the artist controlled context — loses its punch in the sanitising atmosphere of the 'salons' where the obfuscating gasses of art criticism will dull its cutting edges with dull explications.

Ideas are cheap. Art itself is not used but simply plundered for new forms. The content is left with the art. The surrealist images that line our streets selling everything from cigarettes to pantyhose have nothing of the original radical ideas to communicate. They in fact turn surrealism on its head by exploiting the subconscious rather than clarifying it as a source.

What I'm trying to point out is that whereas isolated artworks or movements can easily be exploited, artists collectively aware of their oppression cannot be put over the barrel with such equanimity.

It's difficult to get reliable figures and the independent research badly needs doing but it seems that at least 90% of the total income from art does not go to artists. Practically everyone else in the Art industry is at least paid and yet there must be 9 artists for every one other art worker. If that isn't enough, of the small fraction of the income generated by art that goes to artists I'd guesstimate that at least 80% of it goes to only 500 or so artists in this country. Now if this isn't adding up to an outrageous level of exploitation . . . Add to this that perhaps 99% of the fine art produced remains unused gathering dust.

How many people have passed out of

Art College since WWII? This would give us some idea of the number of serious artist vocations in the country. I'd guess at 100,000 (?). This figure would give us some idea of the problem.

IDENTITY AND POLITICS

The lesson to be learnt here is surely to dispose of this illusion of scarcity in our own collective practise. To show our works in all their abundance and wonderful diversity on our own terms and in our own spaces. Or to stop all art production for three years and spend the time in organising, meeting and sharing information with other artists. Whatever course of action we choose it must be collective, broad based and *above all imaginative*. We can achieve a recognition of our needs and a recognition that the fulfillment of them is a basic human right. Artists are workers. They produce value.

For this to happen we must challenge the false identity of many artists and reclaim an identity from our own personal history and our objective social situation. The process implies a shift of major historical scale. It is not something that will happen through rhetoric or wishful thinking. It can only occur through prolonged communication between artists.

A way of starting this communication process is by listening at length to each others life stories and background histories. Only in this way will we see how our present condition has arisen from real historical experiences and how these conditions effect our work and social relations. Only by listening will mutual respect gradually replace competition between artists.

The difficulty in doing this is often that the subject is emotionally loaded to the point of being taboo. The only possible approach is often very light hearted with much laughter and perhaps even a few tears. It is also very helpful if an agreement can be reached that what is said should be *confidential* and that people should be allowed to have their say *without interruption*.

Alongside this bold moves would be made to re-integrate our art practice with working-class culture. This is something which myself and quite a few artists have been experimenting with in isolation. A conscious move in this direction within a clear framework of Liberation Theory would help make this process much less tentative. ■

This article is extracted from a self-published booklet titled *rough notes on ARTIST LIBERATION*, £1.00, which ~~may be obtained from the author~~, c/o Brixton Art Gallery, 21 Atlantic Road, Brixton SW9.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

If there are all these working class 'yobboes' that have gone to art college and so on, where are they now? Why aren't they at the art barricades?

The discomfort with Fine Art practice (and FA's intolerance of them!) has led them into other categories of art practice which both allow them to survive and, sometimes, in exchange manage to contain their energy. MUSIC has absorbed many to its and everyone's advantage - the vision sound merge coming naturally from working class cultural mores and oratory. Rock music particularly appeals through its vigour and immediacy. (I'm aware that when I use the word 'working class' the word 'human' would often do as well, but it's worth reminding myself that we are human.)

ART THERAPY has many others. I don't know what's going on in art therapy. Can someone inform me from a class perspective? Art Therapy appeals for it is putting art to use to aid humans in distress (aren't we all - in distress, that is!) as well as the offer of that rare thing for artists . . . a salary, goddammit!

These occupations and others - worthy as they are in themselves - split and hide the massive strength of working class artists in this country.

We also become brilliant technicians for commerce, both in the field of Fine Art, by producing what the market needs (empty novelty with allusion to mysterious profundity) and in more obvious commercial ways such as graphic and advertising artists, the graphic and advertising artists being kept ritually apart from the 'pure' fine artist (this ritual deserving a study to itself).

Because specialisation dominates the division of labour and becomes culturally rigidified, unity as artists across these fields is hampered. We radical artists internalise these damaging myths more than anyone. We are disgusted by the artist who works in advertising and dissociate ourselves from them. But this only serves to maintain the divisions.

THE POWER OF ARTISTS

- TO CHANGE THEIR WORLD -

An artist friend recently said to me a phrase I've heard many times - "Artists just reflect the world as it is . . . Art doesn't change the world". Well, be that as it may, but the nature of imagination is certainly transformational as well as representational. But there is much truth in the observation that Art within its present context does reflect rather than lead. Well, what does change the world? The powerless conditioning will answer "nothing much . . ." in its whiney sort of way but we can safely ignore this. It is apparent from history that people on the move in an assertive confident sort of way can change things. Years of lobbying gets no investment in an inner city area - a few days of rioting and it comes pouring in.

"Well, artists don't riot or provoke riot", says my devil's advocate. Agreed - but artists are a section of the working class. Each section of the working class has its means of change that is effective in different conditions. For the unemployed poor, it's the 'molotov' until paramilitary policing makes that too uncomfortable. With proletarians, it's the strike until, as now, it is outlawed. Artists as workers en masse have their own means to achieve their ends. In fact, what makes artists so important at this point in history is that artists have preserved what other working class groups lack.

What? IMAGINATION: disciplined, spontaneous, rational, emotive. These are the weapons of struggle for artists (and later for the whole of the working class!).

We can negotiate and lobby until we're blue in the face. But progress, swift progress, will come when we believe in our own power and show its teeth. Artists have internalised the stuff that they serve others to such an extent they are disempowered from serving their own group interests and humiliated to the point of personal disintegration. Hidden within the innocent homily of "reflecting the world" are centuries of patrons overshadowing our world with their slippery intentions.

"The symbols of counter-consciousness that I see as a counterbalance revolve around self organised contexts that have been established by people as a vehicle for their own expression of creativity."

Steven Willatts
PERFORMANCE MAG 36, 1985

Perhaps it is a self image of radical 'elitist' and isolated artist that doesn't allow him to see that the first place this should happen is with artists themselves. As isolated individuals our best efforts (Willatts being one of the clearest thinkers published about class conscious art) will be neutralised if the context is not challenged (well illustrated in Willatts' own work).

Another socialist artist, Conrad Atkinson, describes his feeling of isolation when he says:

"One thing I needed to research was that sickening sense, I've mentioned before, of being out on a limb, of having no tradition on which to build, that there is nobody of radical visual art practice in this country from which one could get proper bearings at this particular time: whether this is because it doesn't exist or because it is hidden or because what does exist has been so structured that we can't make use of it."

PICTURING THE SYTEM
Pluto/ICA, 1981

Astute observation of his isolation from the thousands of artists attempting radical visual art practice (some in the Mail Art Network even concentrating their work solely on establishing communication between artists). Again, I would guess this is because of the elitist context he has constructed for his own survival.

So I think the self organisation of artists of the contexts to communicate in changes the way the work can be seen; changes the actual meaning of the work. (It is an extension of the 'individualist' ideology that makes the assumption about the independence of an artwork; with a meaning that is the same in all times and places.) A stage further a mass of artists creating context in uncomfortable places (occupying public galleries in a 'legal' but 'artistic' way for instance). Using our artistic prowess, we ARE capable of challenging the present dominant and smothering context for art.

HOW CAN ARTISTS GET WHAT THEY WANT?

I'm interested in an art that organises life rather than decorate it, no matter how intellectual or 'post structural' this decoration is.

I would suggest such an art will arise from organising activity (human relations) rather than a nature sketch book or life drawing. The starting point is most obviously ourselves . . . as artists . . . to organise our own lives.

How is this achieved? The National Artists Association has conferences which include workshops on many useful topics and is broadly based in the artist community out of London. It is an important achievement and deserves full support. It has an important job to do in developing policy and gauging opinion and presenting a united negotiating front. But how do we actually exert power as artists? We cannot withdraw our labour; most of us are surplus to market demand anyway. In a political climate in which traditionally strong unions are being crushed across the board, artists' demands for wages, etc., will be laughed at by the powers that be. It is clear we need different tactics.

In the demeaning of artists' work structural to our society, it is easy to forget the power we have as artists. Our ability to produce images is not to be underestimated.

This power is limited by financial control of the means of distribution ONLY. If artists' need to self organise, achieve social recognition, security of income, etc., can be amalgamated with their art practice, then a challenge to the market system and class society can, I feel, be realistically achieved.

This action would have implications for all workers, not only artists. It would disseminate the crucial element that has been missing in working class struggle - imagination.

BUT the mass of artists are not going to be mobilised in this way by conferences or rhetoric if the past is anything to go by. Most artists' survival is too delicately patched onto the status quo to risk such going out on a limb.

Anna Lockwood says in the N.A.A. Newsletter, January 1986, that artists should "stop allowing competitiveness to divide

them". But how do we do this STOPPING? Any individual artist's competitiveness is tied up with her own survival, insecurity and isolation. How to organise in such a way as to include most artists on the basis of our common self interests, rather than create a limited club of left-wing militants raving about an apathetic majority?

It seems important to organise groups, shows, resource sharing and other activities that include a broad spectrum of viewpoints and focus on developing respect between different viewpoints, bringing the attention of the group to common interests as artists and humans. This implies listening well and asking searching questions.

The annoyance we feel with other artists leads only to division if we direct it at them personally or express it as gossip through the grapevine. And yet such annoyances must be expressed, emotionally; they demand externalising. This is better done as a confidential activity.

"Whose side are you on?" is a war game. "Enemies" are a figment of the State's morbid mythology.

4 THE QUESTION OF QUALITY

Questions of 'Quality' which are used to grade our art are almost always a cover for professionalist and classicist exclusions.

They have a very dubious validity even in relation to 'good taste' which, in itself, was a bourgeois valuation standard in which certain cultural values that had been cultivated by the new middle classes and made into their culture and, because of the dominating and exploitative nature of these classes, were given various mystical and rational explications to give it the appearance of a superior status in relation to all other cultures.

Good Taste reflected the nature of middle class culture - distanced emotion, subtlety, harmonics. etc.

The 'superior status' of middle class culture was accepted by the exploited classes for the most part, their own culture being seen as 'popular trash' of low intellectual content. The invalidity of this claim can be most simply demonstrated in relation to popular music. I remember how, as a young person, I was told I was wasting my time and money on those noisy 45s. They were a fad that would soon be over: why didn't I invest in some 'good' music which needed appreciation? Twentyfive years later the 45s are still classics and still revealing themselves. Questions of quality with records now means how well the sounds recorded play back through your system hi-fi. Good taste is forgotten. But in fine art you will hear people regularly worrying about 'quality' and keeping 'standards' up.

The success of a pop record is measured by demand, either over the whole market or in certain circles. The question of quality depends on how long this demand lasts (the Golden Oldie). It's hard to claim a record that is listened to for 25 years is of poor quality. It must be realised that all likes and dislikes are culturally and historically based and are not absolute. There may be

a very few universals (blue = cold, red = hot) but little is known as yet. We can only take 'universal standards of quality' seriously whilst we accept the dominance of middle class values in art.

Even then it is often a sham to give authority to an individual's personal likes and dislikes. The reality is that there are as many likes and dislikes as there are types of people's experience. Judgements which presume a universal standard of quality simply reproduce an oppressive cultural world view (which with a little more analysis can be labelled imperialism).

I'm not arguing for a populist aesthetics. The lessons of antisemitism and racism and consideration of populism as a realistic ideology. The market promotes a lot of rubbish and a trash lifestyle. And yet, even here, the human spirit shines through. Our sensibilities are all damaged by cultures of oppression and its accompanying misinformation. The market rules in this atmosphere of confusion. What I think is that there can be a multiplicity of standards which are derived from the best thinking and historical legacy in any particular shared viewpoint.

THE END OF 'QUALITY' ... THE IMPLICATIONS

Once we have come to realise what a reactionary nonsense that most of this talk of 'quality' in art usually is, we may wonder how do we then produce 'good' art. Do we produce popular images? Do we please ourselves? What do we strive for? What standards do we set our sights on? How do we excel? For some the standard becomes skill in one's craft. Fine, but craftsmanship so-called can't be equated with art. It might be useful but it often seems to get in the way. I mean, with so much precision in the world, perhaps artists are better engaged in something more wild, naive and raw. Nonetheless, equating skill with quality is still the current 'rational' defence in some art circles.

It seems to me we can do two things when we give up 'quality'. One, and the most rational, is to identify our own personal standards that arise from looking at who we are. From studying the history of ourselves and our peers, each cultural subgroup will have its own images and standards that are relevant to the self interest of its peers. The bit of oppression that makes this difficult is that we have been taught that art is the universal language. But the truth is that capitalism is the universal culture only through the domination and destruction of militarily weaker cultures. So we have to dump the idea that each picture will speak for itself universally and provide a clear and precise context for our work. The context I'm talking about is our lives, the story of our survival. Each image that a person makes achieves excellence if we understand exactly the conditions from which it arose.

The other approach is to forget aesthetics and BE. When I do a performance or work, my main concern is with what I'm doing now, how I'm connecting inner and outer worlds, representing myself, my thought and experience and passion for life. It is not with surface appearances. It's facile to make an attractive picture. Ideas, intention, action rather than aesthetics of high art. I'd rather have my own banality any day than the banality of oppression masquerading as high art.

The result of my actions may be colourful, funny, witty, embarrassing, naive, crude, loud, subtle, intellectual or whatever . . . but they are not contrived. Their purpose is to communicate my intent, not to window-dress my role. Let the critics deal with the contraction that is ME as I AM. For, without doubt I AM BEAUTIFUL and what I do has all the integrity of my humanity and love of the world and personal history of survival, whatever all the oppressive negativity that seeks to weigh me down with self hatred says to the contrary. And it does; reinforced by every back-peddalling unaware soul around me. We should insist on our presence just as we are.

The result is often called Poor Art ('Bad' art as a new category is just a pretentious exercise at being sophisticatedly naive).

Good! The 'worse' our art becomes, the more we can be ourselves released from the burgeoning blackmail of multinational art mafia standards, the more room we make to manoeuvre and get in touch with the standards that derive from our own integrity of purpose and being.

O.K., so sometimes these escape bids end in either unwatchable dramatisations of our inner pain, self mutilations or dull non-events where themes or objects are presented in a dull and artless manner. That's only because people tried to go it alone in isolation. Brave but desperate attempts. But success is only guaranteed if we learn to love and support each other and do it together.

"While we can speak of an advanced mode of production or a higher level of productive forces, one cannot pass such qualitative judgement on aesthetics. It would be incorrect to say that African aesthetics are more advanced than European, or vice versa. There cannot be one correct aesthetic, nationally as well as internationally."

N. Kilele, *Black Phoenix* 2, 1978

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST ... FROM THE BEAST'S POINT OF VIEW

I have always felt very UNCOMFORTABLE with conventional standards of beauty, excellence and good art. Although I can appreciate and enjoy them and probably have as fine judgement as any RA in this area, I have no desire to produce the stuff. In fact, my feelings, in the face of all the stuffiness, are to spoil and negate such standards in my own actions, to disappoint conventional high expectations of me and to avidly avoid making any work that could appear to come from the same stable.

It has been a gradual process of realisation over the years that these feelings are not only generated from my experience of class oppression in the form of a lust for revenge of a destructive nature, but also contain the need to create a place for myself; a place free from the invasion of the values and assumptions of this class that has been on my back for generations; a place where my own standards, strategies and very being can realise themselves, develop and achieve a recognition from my own class as OUR ART; in fact a place where I can start from scratch and find out what on earth 'OUR ART' might be.

Over the same long period I've realised that there are many of us who feel as I do and it is only a particular isolation generated by class oppression that keeps us from realising we are, as they say, not alone. I have, in fact, been resisting against all odds the pressure to capitulate my sense of class integrity to the requirements of another class that is not my own and has in fact exploited my people for generations.

Here I can only talk for myself with complete accuracy and assurance. Working class culture has always been smashed, cheapened, plundered and derided. I am a product of this history. In my own life the crushing weight of alienation on my parents and me has cut me off from a traditional working class culture, growing up in the empty space of the post-war suburbs, my parents keeping afloat by clutching the flotsam of new commodities that provided them with a life of increasing convenience and banality. As 'teenagers' we adopted the Blues and R&B to replace our lost authentic soul expression. In the cultural vacuum we created oppositional cultures from the dust of our imaginations (Ted, Mod, Hippy, Punk).

I don't know what working class art will look like until it arises out of me and develops in interaction with others in the same process. Don't push concepts of 'good art' and selection procedures at me - I won't be bothered with such diversions. My project is to find or reclaim my authentic class 'voice' as an artist, not to labour through an obstacle course of coercive patronising and, for me, completely arbitrary limitations. I'm deeply suspicious of 'great' art and 'beauty', 'good drawing' and all that stuff. I've wasted too many years trying to understand the oblique angles and nuances of those aesthetic theories which leave me cold. I'm busy enough trying to make sense of my own experience in my own terms. I know what I like, what gives me pleasure, what satisfies me, what works. And I know how to organise society a damn sight better than what I see about me.

What I want to achieve now is to break the chains of isolation that make me FEEL alone when I know I'm in a majority. I want OUR work to bubble up through the cracks with such vigour, strength and pride and intelligence and in such quantity as reflects our numbers and productive power that the Cork street Dealers and other pathetic Captains of Culture will be as naturally insignificant as their achievement deserves.

Nitpicking intellectual theories will crumble before a great outpouring of life and invention. Hierarchies and specialisation will return to their functional base and not be institutionalised and vaunted as models and metaphors of social organisation.

We will never accept marginalisation from now on, because together we can laugh at the pathetic carrots of grants and awards, platforms and residencies that are offered us. We can demand our point of view to be heard and seen and touched and felt - as it is - in the way we say - in the place and time we choose.

All we need to do is begin to communicate together face to face about these issues, endlessly, bravely facing our feelings of inadequacy until the spark catches.

Note
So you see my 'place' is to do with people and communication rather than space and time

THE FAILURE OF SUCCESS

In our society not only is the premium on success but FAILURE is taboo. And yet it is impossible to learn without failure. Trying things and failing, experimenting, is the only way to feel your way forward, to discover for yourself rather than to copy. Failure is a joyful and exciting part of human development. When society makes failure a taboo, experimentation either becomes a private, secret or underground matter or is abandoned. The product must be seen to be a success.

What this implies for artwork is that there is pressure to stay within safe territory (providing minor variations on established themes) or, having found a unique and successful style of expression, to stick with it and use it to become known/established even though it becomes repetitious and dull in the process (e.g. Francis Bacon).

This anti-failure clause in our culture is part of a repressive society's adultism; cultural strictures that are set against the natural modes of human development and progress. Success and conservatism are one and the same ideology.

As the value of success goes up through the scarcity of opportunity in the recession, the panic to make it work, not take risks and produce a slick show increases. However, artwork that fails doesn't work, is rubbish, etc., is often trying to achieve something difficult, something human and something worthwhile. With the discouragement allotted to failure, the artist may give up or keep stubbornly trying and failing and suffer tremendous discouragement. This discouragement creates a psychological atmosphere that is very inhibitive of creativity.

Art that is 'good' may not be attempting anything of significance (relative to that place that person has been left by their personal history). Some people can produce an 'attractive picture' with their eyes shut.

The point of criticism should be to get behind appearances and discover what is being attempted. I would put more value on a failed attempt at something difficult, serious, ambitious than a 'successful' attempt at falling off a log. For each artist the critical framework can only be their own lives and what value their attempt would have globally. Further, the more ambitious our project, the more mistakes we are likely to make.

Another point is that success is almost never individual. One person's success usually depends on a lot of other people's unrecognised work. In our society the more the success appears to be individual, the more it is valued. The 'great artist' (e.g. Blake) is often the compiler of many small gains made by others into a 'visionary' whole.

5 CLASS CONSCIOUS CULTURE

The deepest basis of culture resides in our situation on this planet with its rhythm of day and night, month and year and its oppositions of land and sea, seasons, etc. Culture arises in response to the particular geographical situation people find themselves in and their own lives. Culture marks time and seeks to influence that which is beyond immediate control. Culture celebrates new beginnings and endings. It allows the imaginative enjoyment of our senses and our perceptions.

People within a region developed languages which reflected their own conditions and unique human imaginative response. Language is the second font of culture. Language gives us thinking and communication, creating concepts from our perceptions. With the help of language culture gives us imaginative insight into the way we relate to the earth and to each other.

The third level of culture is history. The need to survive/resolve/adapt and share the planet's resources as we evolve more egalitarian, humane and global societies. Culture makes, articulates, encapsulates and gives imaginative dimensions to this struggle. Culture arises from the relationship between language and action. Culture is thinking, communicated, shared and expressed in doing and making. Culture reifies the abstract perception and thought.

All cultures, as they have their own languages, have their own ideas of beauty; the finer reaches of sensory enjoyment synthesised with pro-life meaning. Dominant Europeans' cultures' aesthetic standards derive from three primary sources - Classical (mainly Greek) architecture and sculpture, Renaissance drawing and painting (mainly Italian) and Modernist architecture, transport, film and print (mainly American). These mark the historical start of writing used to develop rational thought and slave-based society (Classical); the birth of science and feudal society (Renaissance); the global exploitation of industry and monetarism (Modernism).

These sources of our judgement of beauty are all alien to my own interests because they all represent systems of exploitation and oppression which I reject. I recognise their achievements and the human anguish that has accompanied them, but I do not accept their standards as directing my cultural activity. Their symbols and artifacts are of use only in the process of refutation and uprising that we are engaged in.

The culture of the European common people which I would wish to have as my base is hard to trace because it was always under attack and because it did not have the resources for monuments that would survive the centuries. Fragments have survived in living traditions, speech and elements of present commercial popular culture. But it is clear that our art was a part of life - not separated from it but integrated with the rituals and cycles of life. Because of the ritual base of common culture performance, installations and time based mixed media work are probably the closest to such lost heritage.

Then again we must keep in mind the fact that the alienated modern world is created by our labour. These creations can be reclaimed from their misuse and celebrated as the fruits of our past lives. And

for the future new connections need to be sketched between production and culture in which the life of people and their needs dominate and reintegrate both.

IS THIS WHY MODERN ART IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE?

European art was once so straightforward, or so it seems in retrospect. Vernacular culture grew from the naturally occurring materials and conditions. Each tribe or region had its distinctive 'folk' culture which shared linguistically derived aspects from a common language area. Further features of seasonal festivals and symbolic creatures or plants were shared over continent or globally. But the essential feature is diversity.

As the ruling classes developed trade, their culture increasingly became international although this didn't stop them playing their war games. Stilted, separate and coldly beautiful, it reflected the managerial, military and entrepreneurial development of the money system. As industrialisation proceeded and the peasants were drawn to the cities, the owners refined and ordered their culture so it reflected their domination through its arrogant claim not only to superiority but monopoly of value and universality. At the same time there was increasing mobility and fragmentation of traditional societies, at first regionally, then nationally, then globally. Within the new urban conditions new cultures arose based not on geography but on similar interest groups. Teenagers, homosexuals, women, artists, etc., assert their identity and create 'sub' cultures. The superior establishment culture is in continual struggle with popular demands through the marketplace.

In earlier societies each region had its own symbol system. Now we have a great mixture of symbol systems; traditional, linguistic, new and establishment, all simultaneously in currency. Popular culture and advertising in different ways find the common denominator which unites society in a banal and alienating currency of cheap symbols. Art and language (unlike music) which delve past the shallow concerns of popular culture or cut through the illusions of advertising face two problems - the continuing domination of ruling class symbol systems (i.e. meaning) and, beneath this, the confusing mixture of received symbol systems from our authentic and often complex history. With the inherent ambiguity of images, it is easy for art to become meaningless even when the artist has clear intention. This may be why so much modern art seems incomprehensible. What can we do about this?

It is difficult for an individual artist to tell what is communicated widely from her work - there is so little feedback from normal methods of art distribution. With much modern work the meaning is only available to the artist and perhaps a small circle of friends. The work may still be appreciated for colour, craft or vague atmosphere, but its meaning, the crucial element, is a mystery.

Culture can only be significant if it can be deciphered. When religions become bankrupt they vaunt mystery and non-understanding as their idea, the same with modern art.

Some suggested methods out of madness

1. 'Labelling' each symbol. Or demonstrating its meaning.
2. Making art that involves personal dialogue or interaction.
3. Describing context. Where are you coming from?
4. Subverting advertising methods and international symbols.
5. Organising support systems which enable us to get feedback on the meaning (or associations) of our work from a wide range of viewpoints so we may proceed intelligently to communicate with who we want to.

This is not to suggest that I want to see an art that is didactic or propagandist only. Some radical artists attempting to address these problems have ended up with something that cannot be enjoyed.

FINE ART'S CLAIM TO SUPERIORITY

The characteristic of fine art which gives it its claim to superiority over other forms has left us such a legacy of snobbery and classism as people strive for the status allotted to it. This is based in its claim to a higher purpose than any other discourse of images in society.

The claim is that fine art is participating in an ongoing philosophical discourse about the nature of our condition, not simply illustrating a parallel verbal discourse but providing a visual dimension of it. The nature of this discourse is outwardly to move gradually towards rationalism, a total understanding or ever expanding, by the building up systematically of gradual achievements. The concrete achievements of science lend this process a tremendous kudos and an illusory purity. Unfortunately, but of course inevitably, it is also a cover and expression of the dominant ideology of our time. The reality is a dynamic tension between the needs of capitalism and the thrust of truth.

So the nature of this human endeavour in which fine art posits itself is embedded and imbued with a class outlook. In fact surplus value realised the spare time needed for such celebration and research. Since Hegel, however, there has been doubt whether art plays a leading role in this project. Whatever the answer to this question, the problem of fine art is also the problem of this class system of forwarding knowledge. Context is firmly divided at this point; one's images are either environmental (murals, advertising, graffiti, art for offices, etc.) or academic. Environmental art has a direct relation to money: the more money spent the more effect the image has. Academic art that is oppositional OR even progressive, rather than simply a consolidation of established values, must clearly state its

philosophical orientation (or such must be derived from it by analysis).

Of course, 'Fine Art' is also a (rationalising) cover for the magical culture of a power elite, the magic mainly being used either to disguise its intentions or to render them invisible.

PERSONAL HISTORY VERSUS ART HISTORY

Art history relies on certain sources - documents in well known archives, expensive publicity, people on the Scene, who make a name for themselves, art as a publicity stunt, etc. An artist doing brilliant work on a provincial council estate probably wouldn't get a mention. On top of this a readable story has to be extricated from a mass of contradictory reality; trends and art movements or groups with names are easier to talk about and summarise. The complex phenomenon that is the evolution of culture is simplified to a simple sequence of heroic gestures. On top of this there is then the bias of the historian who is often white, male, middle class, able bodied, with a strong sense of superiority. So, in the end, Art History, like the history of kings and queens that we heard at school, is a selection of facts to create a fable. This fantasy based on odd facts then affects future practice and bolsters the art scene's status quo.

For those of us who want profound changes now, it's hard to see ourselves as a logical progression of art history however avant garde* or radical because it's basically the history of a class we don't belong to and don't aspire to.

For artists from other backgrounds (the vast majority) we must look towards the usually suppressed or non-existent history of our people. But perhaps more important is to look and listen to our OWN histories. Our personal histories are most reliably pertinent to our situation and to our art.

We are all great successes. We survived, many did not. We certainly suffered conditions that almost killed us but still we are here, the latest of a long line of survivors. The scars and experience of this personal history are within us. Who we ARE is the result of our personal history. Our personal histories are great sources of material, inspiration and images for art. Our next most important source is the life stories of our friends, neighbours, family and peers. Contrary to this, we may adopt other cultures which seem to express our situation better than anything we have. The Blues and R&B were my biggest influence.

People who influenced my art didn't feature in books and films, or barely, so their influence is not visible in the records. Written history is an approximation, a single viewpoint of a multi-viewpoint reality. Personal history is precise, truthful, reliable and when it is substantiated/verified by the consensus of peers it achieves an organic use value.

Where do we come from? The answers to this question, if pursued, will answer the question: "Where are we going?"

*

Avant garde is important, however, because it is the area of art where flux is possible.

Footnote to personal history

I came across a good illustration of the way history simplifies, distorts and creates heroes from a mass of art activity.

"The periodical (Les Tendances Nouvelles) was also an important medium for many lesser known figures of the period (the index includes more than 7000 names) who influenced the more prominent contributors like Kandinski, Feininger, Le Corbusier (Jeanneret), the Futurists and Rodin . . ."

*Review of DA CAPO
Reprint of the Seminal
Paris Revue, 1904-1914*

And, of course, the situation is now much more complex. There are many more artists and they are communicating more . . .

MARGINALISED GROUPS

Ethnic - is used to imply the imperialist notion that a culture is quaint and lesser than, not as intellectual as; to be marginalised as 'not English'.

It seems to be extremely useful for artists with 'backgrounds' in common to get together to discuss, exhibit and identify their differences and to become clear about their self identity and rich, although often hidden, heritage. This often leads onto a reclamation of their own art history. This sort of knowledge is essential for the creation of an authentic art.

Most often groups will also identify various levels and types of discrimination against them by galleries and grant bodies. For instance, the new style funding to 'ethnic groups' is often made without understanding that their culture has fundamentally different precepts to western art.

"We come from a tradition of oratory. Oratory does not simply mean communicating 'orally', but rather as a total experience, a system in which art forms are not divided or compartmentalised. They are a whole . . . a collective experience where we don't have rigid lines between audience and performer."

*Alka Prabhakar
Lambeth Arts No 24, Dec 1985*

For instance, funding has still been the imperialist viewpoint in which dance, poetry, song, painting are separate 'disciplines'. It's like saying we'll recognise black artists only if they make western art. Similar prejudice can be found in the funding of collective women's work, e.g. the Pandoras Box project or Brixton Gallery's 'Womens Work' group.

All groups forming on the basis of cultural commonality are discriminated against even if the group's members have gained 'acceptance' as individuals (as I found with the Anglo-Polish Group I organised) because bourgeois art is meant to be universal and collective groupings of foreigners, women, gays, disabled, i.e. the oppressed, challenge this view.

It's obvious really, if you challenge the oppressive ideology of the establishment, you get discriminated against. What else would you expect? The establishment on the other hand, unwavering for the most part, uses a wide spectrum of strategies to accommodate and diffuse the most vital artistic energies from any oppressed group. Even if they are occasionally forced to give selected individuals who have achieved 'excellence' large amounts of money! Of course, in this essentially useful rational trend towards caucussing in similar self interest groups, we must not forget we are ALL artists. The next establishment tactic, all done in the best possible (good) taste, will be to set these groups up against each other in traditional divide-and-rule style.

To combat sexism, racism, ablebodiedism and all the specialised classes of oppression, we must work in separate groups (this is a proven strategy) but we must also federate and resist the pull to blame each other as agents of the oppression we're facing together.

The establishment has its traditional ways of dividing artists from each other; painters, sculptors, performers, illustrators (not real art) designers ad infinitum. Each of these groups have sub-categories; painters fall into water colourists, abstract, conceptual, figurative, etc., etc. Most groups think the others are a bit sub one way or another. In fact, it often seems that each individual artist thinks everybody else is rubbish except himself and a few friends. This is the hilarious and tragic measure of the extent to which the divisive strategies of the establishment have been effective in the past.

A CLASS CONSCIOUS ART?

Black artists in this country and others have been developing the concept and practice of 'Black Art', an art conscious of its identity and of the implications of that identity, an art with a liberatory social purpose clearly allied with the Black struggle, an art that resists the pressure to ethnicise black artists or otherwise expect to work with a western perspective or for western interests or to marginalise their work.

"We need a Black visual aesthetic because as Black artists we still depend on forms and ideas about art borrowed from European art history. It is that history, and the dominance of its values over us, which we need to reject because they cannot service us in our struggle."

Keith Piper

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."

Marcus Garvey

Can there also be a class conscious art? Do the arguments forwarded by artists like Rasheed Araeen and Eddie Chambers apply to the working class in this country as a whole? They do at least make many points of general relevance to all oppressed people. And Black people are, of course, in the vanguard of the working class.

to value the quality and excellence of the relationships between people.

It brings into question the concept of leadership. If initiative is stifled because of the need to consult everyone about everything in endless boring meetings, the great advantages of collectivity are lost. Trust is essential. But what is trust and how is it built? A leader can exploit the group because a collective work may later be 'claimed' as his own.

Because an artist's survival relies on 'making a name for oneself' this is less likely in a group work. So if you want to survive, choose dog eat dog, avoid other people and sharpen your teeth. Against this crude 'survival logic' we can only otherwise survive if collectively we can agree a critical ideology.

POSSIBLE CHARACTERISTICS OF A WORKING CLASS ART

1. Play with language. Written language has always proscribed, described and defined us. It has never belonged to us. We will remake written language as the fun, dynamic, metamorphic transcription of speech it has forgotten how to be. Bad spelling is just creativity turned on its head.
2. No respector of categories or media. Unexpectedly transmedia. Non specialist and incredibly specialist - at the same time.
3. Immediate, responsive, spontaneous, in the quick of life.
4. Rhythmic.
5. Socially concerned. Humanitarian, Sometimes militant, aggressive.
6. Not precious. A good image is put to use in many forms.
7. Functional rather than luxury.
8. Not a product for sale. Anti-commercial probably. Not a 'performance for the documentation' mentality.
9. Democratic.
10. Approachable, tactile - involving young people and used by them.
11. Asking awkward questions - blunt.
12. The articulation of meaning. Clear, sensible, intelligent.
13. This is an endless list!

TERMS

Working class - this is a central term in this pamphlet so what do I mean by it?

My mother said to me recently: "You say you want to get on and get your life together (!) so why do you keep putting yourself down by calling yourself working class?"

Left commentators and trendy columnists are obsessed with 'who is really working class'. And we have the absurd phenomenon of a majority of the population who are supposed to be 'classless' because they feel complete alienation from the traditional working class IMAGE. Snobbery and inverted snobbery are indistinguishable in the melange of mistaken identity. Everybody is nobody.

The problem is identity, not class. Class is a definition of economics and secondly cultural background.

Let us go back to basics. In this pamphlet, working class means most of us. Working class includes all those who don't live on a private income (and some that do to my knowledge) or whose interests aren't those of corporate capitalism. Working class is everything outside that 7% that own 84% of our - OUR - wealth and have claimed history as theirs. And so on. So this pamphlet and the term is for all those who may not feel working class but have the same interests, i.e. nearly everyone.

Economic exploitation goes hand in hand with a series of social conditionings which serve to keep us down and maintain the economic order. The main characteristics of this conditioning for working class people are: being required as children to be submissive (don't answer back, etc.); to devalue ourselves; to think we are ignorant compared with other people (don't be stupid, etc.); to feel we are powerless; to settle for very little; to accept insecurity as an unavoidable fact of life; to feel "lucky to have a job"; and to despise ourselves and each other for not standing up for ourselves and each other and for giving in to violence at each other and to alcoholism.

At the same time our own surviving human resources remind us that this is nonsense and we go ahead in spite of the negative feelings that plague us at times. However we have headaches, back problems, stomach ulcers and all types of other more serious psychosomatic disorders and actual mental stress, depression and breakdown that lead us to drink, drugs or hospitalisation. For most, if not all, people the debilitating effect of this hurtful conditioning is where the real struggle of our daily lives lies.

It is only when we connect these real hurts (repressed in our bodymind they appear as mysterious symptoms) to their causes in our PERSONAL EXPERIENCE of class oppression that we can reclaim our health and power.

The confusing thing is that every time you spend the evening watching TV (for instance), these delicate insights into our own conditions are negated by the facade of false normality supported by commercialism and its attendant culture. This culture maintains us in the ubiquitous crisis of self doubt known as reality. This facade of false normality is driven into us with the authority of a contrived social consensus.

As soon as we spend more time listening to the drama of each of our own histories than we spend 'relaxing' to official media, their grip on our reality quickly breaks up (being only a facade, an illusion). Various social taboos keep this process from occurring. To be effective this listening must go further than that normally achieved in social discourse. We must listen without interruption and with complete respect.

This leads us to the central taboos which restrict or ban the physiological processes that bind the experience of hurt (as memory) to its physical repression in our bodies.

This second draft includes feedback from Janusz Sroczek, Jo Baxter, Glyn Banks, Hannah Vowles, Graham Harwood, owes insight from unpublished papers by Sally Potter, and articles by Harvey Jackins, Eddie Chambers, Rashied Anan and Anna Lockwood.

6 ARTISTS SUPPORT ARTIST

How do you support an artist? Especially if you don't particularly feel enthusiastic about his work?

I'm talking of what I need but this will probably work for other artists as well.

I need interested attention and questions directed at my working process and ideas, rather than a judgement or opinion on the product. We should first keep in mind that enthusiasm can rationally and reliably be directed towards the fact that the person is working as an artist in spite of all the difficulties. This alone is something to get excited about. To be engaged in the artistic endeavour is wonderful whatever the current results. Support even from this point of view will almost always allow the artist to become stronger and more confident.

Reviewing aloud the details of my creative process to people allows me to gain confidence in the substance of my own approach and become more objective about it.

The artist's life and working conditions, with particular reference to what is going well, major influences and inspirations - this must not be allowed to become a morbid dirge or it will be counter-productive. Again the effectiveness of this will be heightened enormously by agreements to listen without interruption (time limit agreed) and confidentiality of subject matter.

Having gained considerable insight into where the person is coming from, it may then be useful to feedback what the work communicates to you - your associations, understanding of symbols, things you enjoyed, all the things that the work evokes. (Don't attempt this if the work makes you feel bad; go back to the work process and the artist's life.) This takes some skill in putting artistic experience into words but can be very useful and exhilarating for someone to verbalise all their positive experiences of art work.

The struggle needs to be appreciated. With this sort of support invariably the work will dramatically improve.

Negative criticism, although often well meant, will often only serve to reinforce the oppression, rejection and insecurity the artist lives with. If, however, the artist is dumping internalised oppressive negativity on others through his work, it may be necessary to point this out even without being invited to comment as a critic or friend. For instance, we could not justify racist images on the grounds of artistic freedom and support. It should be kept in mind that such intervention will be much more effective if we can respect the person (and their own struggle) whilst criticising the work.

----- THE ARTIST'S PLEDGE -----

I promise to always remember my power, love and intelligence as an artist, and the vital role that artists have played in every culture and time. I will never again invalidate any other artist, including myself, but rather ally myself with all artists to end our economic oppression, and enthusiastically encourage the creativity of every human.

It would seem that this pledge, if taken seriously by a large number of artists, would lead to a breakdown of the isolation that keeps artists apart and to a solidarity which would be effective not only in ending our own economic exploitation but that of all other workers.

Why do we attack and criticise each other? It is a function of the situation of apparent scarcity of resources for art that has been foisted on us. We have been persuaded that this scarcity is a reality and so we compete with each other for the few resources allocated to art by the state.

How is it best to work with this pledge?

A small group of friends is best although even then a good deal of embarrassment is likely and should be expected. After a while the embarrassed giggles will subside; then you take turns in saying the pledge and then afterwards say the first implication that comes to mind. As the pledge is designed to contradict the effects of the conditioning that our oppressor has forced on us, we can expect implications to include angry reactions, tearful relief, annoyed objections and other emotional stuff. Just let all such reactions blow over.

Meet again in a few weeks and report on how taking this attitude has been in life. If the pledge is held seriously for a few months in this way, quite noticeable results can be expected.

It is probably quite useful to read it first thing in the morning and last thing at night, when convenient, as this is the time of day when our minds are most open to conditioning.

7 VIEWPOINT OF AUTHOR

A friend reading the first draft suggested I should say more about the viewpoint that I am writing from - my own history.

I was not allowed to take Art at A-level because I was also interested in studying science. This, with pressure from my parents who quite reasonably wanted me to have a proper respectable job, manoeuvred me from my art vocation into an architecture course at Portsmouth. Whilst there I organised an Arts workshop and became involved with many avant garde and radical activities.

In the early 70s I joined the Scratch Orchestra, an important post Fluxus performance collective. I also wrote a series of three books which were published in Brighton and New York with some success (1972-74). Then in 1977, whilst researching a new book on human ability, I did a lot of movement research, mostly at X6 collective. For some while I taught Contact Improvisation and produced and wrote for New Dance magazine.

During the same period I worked for Phantom Captain and other performance orientated theatre groups, as well as doing my own performance, often with improvising musicians.

Architectural contract work has provided me with periodic income along with teaching work at Architectural Association, Hull, Kingston and Brighton Schools of Architecture, and research.

Recently I concentrated on Performance Art and Collective visual art forms (including Mail Art and installations) although I'm also in an experimental rock band called DON KEY WORK.

Although my media have been quite varied, there is a coherent ideology that unifies my activity. This is partly expressed in this pamphlet.

In addition to this cultural work, I am also a father of a six year old son, which is a large and important part of my life.

ROUGH NOTES ON ARTISTS LIBERATION

2nd Draft, February 1986

These notes on Artists Liberation from a working class (male, white, Anglo-Polish, ex-catholic, able bodied, heterosexual) viewpoint. However, I think artists liberation is for all artists regardless of class background. At the same time, each viewpoint has its particular experiences to relate and contributions to make to the general picture.

I would like to hear from artists of all viewpoints on the topics raised here. Write to me at the address below.

Future editions of these notes may be amended to include new material in response to whatever feedback I receive. People whose comments change the text will be acknowledged.

Stefan Szczelkun
85 St. Agnes Place
Kennington
London SE11 4BB . England

